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Minor Mlabri: A Hunter-Gatherer Language of Northern Indochina by Jørgen Rischel

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Jørgen Rischel, *Minor Mlabri: A hunter-gatherer language of northern Indochina*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 1995. 367 pp. \$98, cloth.

Among the endangered languages of the world, few are more endangered than those spoken by small groups of hunter-gatherers, eking out a precarious existence in the rainforests of Southeast Asia. In the face of the ever-decreasing resources of their preferred habitat, and the need to interact with agriculturalists to supplement their meager diets with cultivated foods and to provide spouses for their children, they are of necessity gradually abandoning their native tongues for those of their settled neighbors with whom they must interact. Although the very existence of some of these groups is doubted by some members of the scientific community, exist they do. Rischel's book documents the language of one such group, the Minor Mlabri living in the mountains of north-eastern Thailand, whose language and culture are now close to extinction, with fewer than a dozen people (eight adults and three children) still able to speak the language (26).

The Mlabri ("Forest People"), pejoratively referred to in Thai as Khon Thong Luang ("Yellow Leaf People"), speak two closely related dialects. Rischel (R) is concerned with the description of the dialect of the lesser of the two groups, which he refers to as the Minor or β -Mlabri, rather than that of the numerically more numerous α -Mlabri.

The first chapter provides a description of the Mlabri themselves, the various names by which they have been referred to in the reports of expeditions dating back to the 1920s, the relationship between the two dialect groups, and their present social situation. Chapter 2 places the language of the Mlabri in its wider context, diachronic as well as synchronic; discusses language-contact phenomena and bilingualism; and surveys the possible origins of what seems to be a highly mixed lexicon. The two languages geographically closest to Mlabri are Tin and Khmu, both member of the Khmuic subgroup of northern Mon-Khmer languages. R suggests that, although some of the Mlabri lexicon is probably due to very recent borrowings from one or the other of these languages, other lexical similarities may be due to borrowing that took place centuries ago (predominantly from Tin), while other items may be direct retentions of what R characterizes as Pre-Tin forms. There is, in addition, a considerable body of forms that appear to be borrowings from one or another dialect of Thai or Lao. Of particular significance for reconstruction purposes are what R refers to as a significant residue of old Mon-Khmer etyma in Mlabri that do not seem to be from either Pre-Tin or even from Khmuic.

All of this tends to support the view that, although within recent memory the Mlabri have chosen to isolate themselves from outsiders and to follow a hunter-

gatherer lifestyle, this has not always been their practice. The relatively extensive borrowing that R discusses suggests periods of fairly intense interaction with other linguistic groups. In this respect they are little different from the hunter-gatherers of the Philippines, whose lexicons suggest periods of intense interaction with settled agriculturalists, with resulting bilingualism and the development of a stratum of borrowed items. Following these periods of close contact, there must have been periods of relative isolation, during which their languages have undergone various innovations, some of which appear to have been deliberate distortions with emblematic function, for the purpose of re-establishing their own linguistic identities (Reid 1987, 1994a/b, Headland and Reid 1989). This does not mean, of course, that the Mlabri have always been hunter-gatherers. R suggests that "their culture may even reflect *regressions* from more developed stages to a survival culture" (22). There are a number of examples of hunter-gatherers, such as the Punan and Penan of Central Borneo who have clearly chosen a nomadic lifestyle over a sedentary one (Hoffman 1986). The Tasaday of the southern Philippines are a further case in point (Reid, to appear).

Chapter 3 provides a phonological sketch of the language. R notes that Mlabri has a very conservative phonology in that neither tone nor register contrasts occur. The articulatory features that have given rise to such contrasts in other Southeast Asian languages are preserved intact in the language.

Chapter 4 discusses the Mlabri word. R provides a general characterization of some of the formal characteristics of Mlabri morphology. He notes that, although Mlabri is predominantly isolating like other Mon-Khmer languages, it is unusual in having a rather rich morphology. He discusses the patterns of infixation and prefixation, drawing attention to some interesting dissimilatory tendencies associated with these affixes. There is a not-unexpected constraint against deriving forms in which /t/ occurs twice as the result of infixation. However there also appears to be a rather unusual constraint that determines the choice of causative allomorph, either /pa-/ or /ba-/. The former occurs on forms with voiced initials, the latter on forms with voiceless initials, leading to the conclusion that there is voicing dissimilation between the initial consonant of the prefix and that of the stem.

There is a brief discussion of compounding, and an even briefer discussion of inflection, consistent with his basic assumption that all affixation in Mlabri is derivational. The section on word semantics contains a discussion of negation, and color terminology, and a fairly extensive analysis of the semantic features of kinship terminology.

Chapter 5 provides a description of the syntax of Mlabri. R describes the features of what he calls the prototypical noun phrase, including the nature of possession, and coordination, the form of numeral constructions containing classifiers, as well as various other topics such as the nature of determiners, deictics, and personal and possessive pronouns. Verb phrases are described "to the extent that such an entity can be recognized as a syntactic constituent in

Mlabri" (158), with mention of various aspectual forms, particularly the perfective *ʔa*, which has no counterpart in either Tin or Khmu.

The second section of chapter 5 deals with the syntax of sentences, sentence types, the nature of transitivity, the relative order of constituents, topicalization, and focus. Throughout this chapter, and also in the previous chapter (82, 131, 164, 170, 212, 213), R charts out for himself a course of "theoretical neutrality." In his chapter on morphology, even though he asserts that the question of word classes is of paramount importance for any treatment of syntax, he decides to avoid discussion of any of the issues involved in providing adequate syntactic justification for even such terms as noun, verb, and adverb, preferring instead to rely on what he calls "the general consensus on the meaning of these terms" (82). The reader is left wondering what this consensus is. Elsewhere, he says that he assumes a "'natural' classification of lexical material into noun-like and verb-like words plus a residue of 'grammatical' words" (212). I suppose that the "default" interpretation of these terms that R refers to must be the traditional semantic characterization of a noun as the name of a person, place, or thing, and so on. But such characterizations also have theoretical relevance. There really is no such thing as theoretical neutrality, and there is no real virtue in attempting to maintain this position, despite the claim that categories established within the constraints of a theoretical framework may not reflect the "genuine properties" of a language (141). There can be no determination of the properties of a language without recourse to some theoretical framework, whether explicit or implicit. It is true, as R notes (131), that reading grammatical descriptions couched in theoretical terms that the reader is not familiar with can lead to a preoccupation with understanding the formalizations involved without grasping the nature of the linguistic phenomena being described. However, without recourse to an explicit theoretical framework, there can be no real syntactic explanation of the linguistic phenomena, since there are no theory-independent syntactic characterizations of any lexical or phrasal category, despite R's recourse to characterizations such as "noun phrase in the strict sense" (135), and "verb serialization in the strict sense" (164).

R states that his main ambition is to "characterize the syntax in a way that is both general and explicit enough to serve as easily accessible input to genetic and typological studies" (131). There is an abundance of typological studies, starting with the work of Greenberg and his colleagues, that rely on such pretheoretical descriptions. They use traditional semantic characterizations of notions such as subject and object, and can be highly misleading as to the syntactic status of the features being typologized. (See Starosta 1996.) What is needed is a body of theoretically consistent descriptions of Southeast Asian languages, before we can achieve an adequate syntactic typology of these languages.

R is himself quite aware of the problems that arise when theory is ignored, and attempts to make up for this by ensuring that a large proportion of the lexical entries are accompanied by illustrative phrasal and sentential material, from

which further analysis can proceed. He notes, "I have made no particular effort in this monograph to work within a consistent and fully adequate terminology, but in the dictionary section I put considerable emphasis on giving informative translations and providing transparent examples of usage" (213).

Part II of the monograph, labeled simply Lexicon, contains a fairly substantial Mlabri–English dictionary (chapter 7) and an English–Mlabri index (chapter 8) of around 1300 entries. The use of the term "dictionary" for this material is a little premature. It is really a well-illustrated glossary, but contains little of the other material that one would normally expect to find in a dictionary. As noted above, there is little grammatical information, nor is there any indication of the source of borrowed lexical forms. R explains (62): "In view of the complexity of the scenario I have preferred *not to mark loan words at all in the dictionary below*, not even in cases where the source seems obvious. For the scholar using the data for language comparison such information would often be either superfluous or insufficient. It may be altogether more misleading than revealing to give brief indications of a source language for borrowed items since the path of borrowing may be anything but direct." Nevertheless, one would expect a dictionary to contain such information where it is known.

Despite the equivocations discussed above, the book provides an excellent view of a people and language that have until now been largely unreported. It gives an extensive set of carefully recorded data that will be invaluable for comparative and typological studies and should form a part of the library of any scholar interested in Mon-Khmer and other languages of Southeast Asia.

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Winfred P. Lehmann. 1992. *Historical linguistics*, 3d ed. London and New York: Routledge. xviii + 338 pp. \$19.95, paper (Canada \$24.95).

The normal expectation for a second or succeeding edition of a book is that it will be an improvement over earlier editions. In this respect, the book under review (hereafter HL) is a disappointment.

The second edition of HL appeared in 1973, and in his preface to the new edition Lehmann (L) notes (ix) that significant advances have occurred in the interim. "Among the most important, many linguists are now investigating the history of languages outside the Indo-European language family." Three new chapters have been added: 2, The background of historical linguistic study; 14, Interrelationships among changes; and 15, Linguistic and cultural change (which incorporates 3–4 pages that appeared at the end of Ch. 12 in the second edition). In addition, L's earlier Ch. 8 (Broadening of language materials; dialect geography) and 9 (Models of language and of linguistic communities with reference to change) have been partially recombined into a single Ch. 6 (Linguistic communities), and his earlier Ch. 11 (Syntactic and morphological change), which occupied 22 pages, has been split into Ch. 11 (Morphological change) and Ch. 12 (Syntactic change), together occupying 35 pages.

Apart from these additions, most changes are cosmetic: a larger typeface is used for major section headings, and new subsection headings have been introduced periodically to set off important information (e.g., discussions of Grassmann's and Verner's Laws) that had earlier been lost in pages of unbroken text. The principal noncosmetic changes include (1) an attempt in Ch. 4 (Genealogical classification of languages) to update information on comparative work in language families other than Indo-European, (2) a moderate to substantial revision of the earlier Ch. 3 (Typological classification of languages) in a new Ch. 5 (Typological classification), and (3) a change in the title of the earlier Ch. 7 (Study of loss in language: lexicostatistics) to Ch. 9, (Glottochronology), together